

Arizona Department of Child Safety

Comparing Department Practices for Classifying and Locating Children Missing from Care to Best Practices

Department's practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements, the Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and the Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care

Special Report

September 2021
Report 21-113

A Report to the Arizona Legislature

Lindsey A. Perry
Auditor General





The Arizona Auditor General's mission is to provide independent and impartial information and specific recommendations to improve the operations of State and local government entities. To this end, the Office provides financial audits and accounting services to the State and political subdivisions, investigates possible misuse of public monies, and conducts performance audits and special reviews of school districts, State agencies, and the programs they administer.

The Joint Legislative Audit Committee

Senator **Nancy Barto**, Chair
Senator **Rosanna Gabaldon**
Senator **David Livingston**
Senator **Juan Mendez**
Senator **Kelly Townsend**
Senator **Karen Fann** (ex officio)

Representative **Joanne Osborne**, Vice Chair
Representative **Tim Dunn**
Representative **Steve Kaiser**
Representative **Jennifer L. Longdon**
Representative **Pamela Powers Hannley**
Representative **Rusty Bowers** (ex officio)

Audit Staff

Dale Chapman, Director
Jeremy Weber, Manager

Jessika Hallquist, Team Leader
Robert Bannatz

Contact Information

Arizona Auditor General
2910 N. 44th St., Ste. 410
Phoenix, AZ 85018-7271

(602) 553-0333

contact@azauditor.gov

www.azauditor.gov



LINDSEY A. PERRY
AUDITOR GENERAL

ARIZONA
AUDITOR GENERAL

MELANIE M. CHESNEY
DEPUTY AUDITOR GENERAL

September 24, 2021

Members of the Arizona Legislature

The Honorable Doug Ducey, Governor

Mr. Michael Faust, Director
Arizona Department of Child Safety

Transmitted herewith is a report of the Auditor General, *A Special Report of the Arizona Department of Child Safety—Comparing Department Practices for Classifying and Locating Children Missing from Care to Best Practices*. This report is in response to Laws 2020, Ch. 53, §3, and was conducted under the authority vested in the Auditor General by Arizona Revised Statutes §41-1279.03. I am also transmitting within this report a copy of the Report Highlights to provide a quick summary for your convenience.

As outlined in its response, the Arizona Department of Child Safety agrees with all the findings and plans to implement or implement in a different manner all the recommendations.

My staff and I will be pleased to discuss or clarify items in the report.

Sincerely,

Lindsey A. Perry

Lindsey A. Perry, CPA, CFE
Auditor General

Arizona Department of Child Safety Comparing Department Practices for Classifying and Locating Children Missing from Care to Best Practices

Department's practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements, the Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and the Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care

Audit purpose

To compare the Department's practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children with best practices.

Key findings

- The Department is responsible for helping to locate children missing from care (runaway or missing/abducted children).
- The Department's practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with many practices recommended by the Child Welfare League of America. For example, the Department maintains a 24/7 hotline that can be contacted to report children missing from care and requires caseworkers to notify law enforcement and other key stakeholders within 24 hours about children missing from care.
- Caseworkers did not always comply with Department documentation requirements in cases we reviewed, including documenting that all required notifications were made and documenting efforts to locate children within 10 days of making those efforts. The Department implemented a biweekly review process in 2020 to help ensure that information about children missing from care is accurate and up to date in its case management system.
- Although a recommended practice, the Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from care. The Department reported that formalizing expectations with law enforcement would be of value, but establishing a formal agreement with each of the approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in Arizona would be impractical.
- The Department lacks some detailed guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care.

Key recommendations

The Department should:

- Revise its policies to provide guidance on when specific stakeholder notifications and documentation of those notifications by caseworkers are not applicable.
- To help ensure timely documentation, expand its biweekly review process to include determining whether efforts to locate children missing from care are occurring and documented in case notes.
- Work with law enforcement to formalize expectations regarding their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from Department care. For example, the Department could pilot establishing a formal agreement or mutually agreed-upon protocols with 1 or more law enforcement agencies in Arizona.
- Update its policies and/or develop supplemental guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care, and ensure caseworkers who manage cases involving children missing from care are informed of and trained on this additional guidance.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Finding 1: Department practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with CWLA-recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements	4
Department practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with CWLA-recommended practices	
Caseworkers did not always comply with Department documentation requirements in cases we reviewed	
Department has 2 processes for reviewing cases of children missing from care	
Recommendations	
Finding 2: Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care	8
Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from care	
Department policies lack some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care	
Recommendations	
Summary of recommendations: Auditor General makes 4 recommendations to the Department	12
Appendix A: Scope and methodology	a-1
Department response	
Figure	
1 Number of children the Department reported were on runaway or missing status as of the end of each month in calendar year 2020 (Unaudited)	3



The Arizona Auditor General has released a special report on the Arizona Department of Child Safety's (Department) practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children and a comparison of the Department's practices with best practices, as required by Laws 2020, Ch. 53, §3. For the purposes of this report, "children missing from care" refer to children in out-of-home care who have either run away from a placement or are missing/abducted unless we specifically refer to children classified as either runaway or missing/abducted (see textbox).

Department responsible for helping locate children missing from care

Federal law requires states to (1) develop protocols for expeditiously locating any child missing from foster care and (2) report information on specified missing or abducted children or youth to law enforcement for entry into the National Crime Information Center (NCIC) missing person database.^{1,2} Arizona Revised Statutes (A.R.S.) §8-810 similarly requires the Department to (1) notify law enforcement of children for whom the Department receives a report or information indicating that a child is at risk of serious harm and whose location is unknown and (2) provide the information required for law enforcement to enter the children into the Arizona Crime Information Center (ACIC) and NCIC.³

The Department may learn that a child is missing from care in several ways. For example, the Department requires foster parents and congregate care staff to inform the Department within 2 hours of becoming aware that a child is missing from care. The Department can also learn that a child is missing from care during a child welfare investigation or from other knowledgeable parties, such as the child's family.

The Department has implemented 2 separate policies for locating children missing from care, including a policy for children classified as runaway and a policy for children classified as missing/abducted. Although

Key terms

Child missing from care—A child in Department care (i.e., a child who is a ward of the court and placed in the Department's care, custody, and control) who is either runaway or missing/abducted (see next 2 definitions).

Runaway child—A child in Department care who has voluntarily run away from an out-of-home placement. Literature indicates that running away is a relatively common experience, especially among children in out-of-home care.¹ According to a Department report, runaway children as of December 31, 2020, were 16 years old on average.

Missing/abducted child—A child in Department care who is abducted or otherwise missing. A child is considered abducted when a person takes, entices, or keeps the child from the Department's lawful custody or intentionally fails or refuses to immediately return or impedes the immediate return of the child to the Department. According to a Department report, missing/abducted children as of December 31, 2020, were 6 years old on average.

¹ Dworsky, A., Wulczyn, F., & Huang, L. (2018). Predictors of running away from out-of-home care: Does county context matter? *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, 20(3), 101-115. Retrieved 2/9/21 from <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/cityscape/vol20num3/ch5.pdf>.

Source: Auditor General staff review of Department policies, a Department report, and literature.

¹ 42 USC 671(9) & (35) specify that the reporting requirement relates to children and youth for whom states have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and who the states have reasonable cause to believe are, or are at risk of being, sex trafficking victims.

² NCIC is the nation-wide database maintained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and available to federal, state, and local law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies for tracking crime-related information, such as missing persons. According to the FBI, information in NCIC assists agencies in criminal justice and law enforcement objectives, such as locating missing persons.

³ The ACIC is the Arizona counterpart to the NCIC.

the specific actions outlined in these 2 policies differ in some ways, the Department's process for classifying and locating runaway and missing/abducted children generally involves the following actions:⁴

- **Department policies require updating its case management system to reflect the child's status—** Department policies require DCS specialists (caseworkers) to update its case management system to reflect the child's status as runaway or missing (which includes abducted children).⁵
- **Department policies require key stakeholders to be notified—** Department policies require caseworkers to notify various stakeholders, including law enforcement, the child's out-of-home caregiver, parent(s), guardian ad litem and/or attorney, and the courts, within 24 hours of the Department learning a child is missing from care.^{6,7} Department policies also require caseworkers to notify the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), although effective September 29, 2021, Laws 2021, Ch. 364, §1, requires law enforcement to notify NCMEC. NCMEC, a private nonprofit organization, is the national clearinghouse and resource center for information about missing and exploited children. According to NCMEC, its staff can create and disseminate missing child posters to help generate leads and raise public awareness about missing children.
- **Caseworker conducts efforts to locate the child until the child is found or is no longer a ward of the court—** Although not always specified in Department policies (see Finding 2, pages 9 through 10, for additional information), caseworkers conduct efforts to locate children missing from care. Department policies require caseworkers to complete some actions to locate the child, including contacting parties that may have information about the child or the child's whereabouts, such as persons significant to the child and caregivers from prior placements.⁸ Department policies also require all efforts to locate the child to be documented as case notes in the Department's case management system. Caseworkers can also request assistance from other Department staff, including specialized field staff and OCWI staff. These staff have access to various databases that can help in the search for information leads on the child's whereabouts, such as a school registration database. According to the Department, its efforts to locate the child should remain ongoing until the child is found or is no longer a ward of the court, such as when the child turns 18 years old.

Statute requires Department to report information about children missing from care

A.R.S. §8-526 requires the Department to report the number of children in Department care by placement type, and the Department includes this information in 2 reports that are available on its website: the *Semi-Annual Child Welfare Report* and the *Monthly Operational and Outcome Report (MOOR)*.^{9,10} The Department uses 2

⁴ Examples of differences in the policies include the policy for missing children requiring the Department's Office of Child Welfare Investigations (OCWI) to be notified when a child goes missing and the policy for runaway children including criteria for referring high-risk runaway cases to OCWI staff for specialized assistance. The OCWI is a criminal justice agency within the Department that has investigative authority when criminal conduct is alleged.

⁵ In February 2021, the Department transitioned to a new case management system, Guardian, from its prior case management system, CHILDS.

⁶ The Department reported that if a child's out-of-home caregiver notifies the Department that the child is missing, the Department does not need to notify the caregiver. However, this is not stated in the Department's policy.

⁷ A.R.S. §8-531 defines guardian ad litem as a person whom a court appoints to protect the interest of a minor in a particular case before the court.

⁸ Department policies do not include required time frames for making these initial contacts.

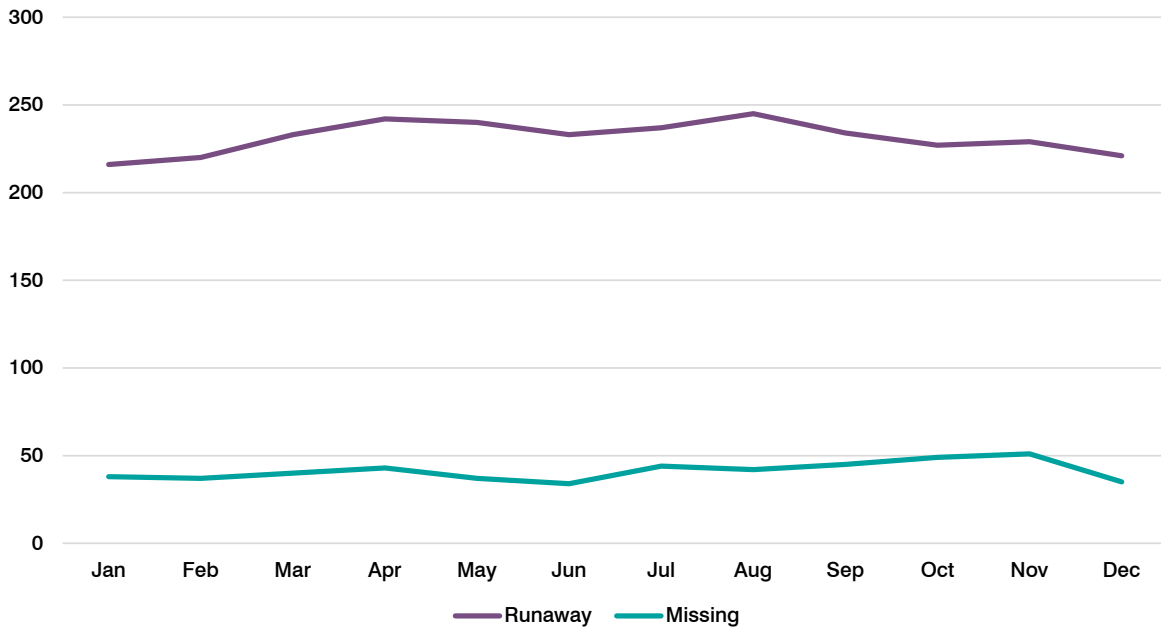
⁹ The Department has not reported the number of children in Department care by placement type in the MOOR since its transition to Guardian in February 2021. According to Department staff, as of August 2021, the Department was still working to develop the reports in Guardian needed to report this information.

¹⁰ The Department has a data validation process for its *Semi-Annual Child Welfare Report*. As part of this process, Department staff review the accuracy of the status of children aged 12 years or younger classified as runaway in the Department's case management system. The Department reported that children under the age of 12 are less likely to have run away, and if a child's status is determined to be incorrectly entered as runaway, the status will be updated to missing.

placement types to reflect the status of children missing from care in these reports, including the placement type “runaway” for runaway children and the placement type “missing” for missing/abducted children. Figure 1 shows the number of children the Department reported were on runaway or missing status as of the end of each month in calendar year 2020. As shown in the figure, the number of runaway children ranged from 216 to 245 children as of the end of each month, and the number of missing children ranged from 34 to 51 children as of the end of each month. The number of runaway and missing children combined comprised about 2 percent of the children in Department care as of the end of each month during calendar year 2020.

Figure 1
Number of children the Department reported were on runaway or missing status as of the end of each month in calendar year 2020¹

(Unaudited)



¹ These numbers represent all children on runaway or missing status as of the end of each calendar month, including new runaway or missing children and children who remain missing from care from a previous month(s).

Source: Auditor General staff review of information from the Department’s *Monthly Operational and Outcome Reports*.

Further, Laws 2021, Chapter 294, §1, revises statute to include additional reporting requirements for runaway and abducted children.¹¹ The law requires the Department to report specific information about both runaway and abducted children for each 6-month period beginning January 1, 2022 through December 31, 2026. For example, the law requires the Department to report:

- The number of new runaway episodes and child abductions during the reporting period.
- The number of runaway and abducted children returned to care during the reporting period.
- The number of children on runaway or abducted status as of the last day of the reporting period (by age and by categories of length of time on the status).
- For runaway children, the placement location from which the child ran away, including licensed foster homes, nonlicensed kinship placements, group homes, and other placements.

¹¹ Although the law requires the Department to report information on abducted children, as stated previously the Department uses 2 classifications for children missing from care: runaway and missing (which includes abducted children). As of July 2021, the Department reported that it did not have plans to create a third classification specifically for abducted children.



Department practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with CWLA-recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements

LEGISLATIVE REQUEST: Compare the Department's practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children with best practices.

CONCLUSION: The Department's practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with many practices we reviewed that are recommended by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA). For example, the Department has classifications for children missing from care, maintains a 24/7 hotline that can be contacted to report children missing from care, requires caseworkers to notify law enforcement and other stakeholders about children missing from care, and requires timely documentation of caseworkers' efforts to locate these children. However, caseworkers did not always comply with the Department's documentation requirements in cases we reviewed. For example, caseworkers did not always document that every required notification was made or document their efforts to locate children within 10 days of the effort, as required by Department policies. The Department has 2 processes for reviewing cases of children missing from care that can help ensure notifications and efforts to locate the children are made, including monthly supervisory case reviews and biweekly reviews of children missing from care.

Department practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with CWLA-recommended practices

We compared the Department's practices to practices recommended by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)—a coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies that provides best practices on policies, programs, and practices related to child welfare.^{12,13} The CWLA's practice guidelines are intended to help child welfare agencies effectively respond when children go missing from care.^{14,15} The Department's practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with many of CWLA's recommended practices we reviewed. For example, the Department:

¹² We selected the CWLA guidelines for comparison to Department practices based on suggestions from 2 best practice organizations: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and NCMEC. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that engages in research and dissemination to inform public and private decision makers and evidence-based policies and practices to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

¹³ In addition to reviewing the CWLA's guidelines, we also interviewed CWLA staff about them.

¹⁴ Child Welfare League of America. (2005). *CWLA best practice guidelines: Children missing from care*. Washington, DC.

¹⁵ The CWLA's practice guidelines also address other practices related to children missing from care, such as practices for decreasing the likelihood of children going missing from care and ensuring that children returned to care, their caregivers, and their birth families receive appropriate services and support. We limited our comparison of Department practices to the CWLA's recommended practices to only those practices related to classifying and locating children missing from care, as directed by Laws 2020, Ch. 53, §3.

- **Has classifications for children missing from care**—According to the CWLA, child welfare agencies should define terms used for children missing from care, which should depend on the statutes in the child welfare agency’s state and are intended to facilitate a common language for effective communication. As stated in the Introduction (see pages 1 through 2), the Department uses 2 classifications for children missing from care: runaway and missing, which includes abducted children. In addition, the Department’s definition for abducted children is consistent with statute.¹⁶
- **Maintains dedicated staff for receiving missing child reports through its 24/7 hotline**—According to CWLA staff, maintaining a dedicated point of contact who is available at all times to receive missing child reports is necessary because caseworkers are often busy. Consistent with this recommended practice, the Department maintains a 24/7 hotline that can be contacted to report a child missing from care.
- **Requires notification of key stakeholders about children missing from care**—According to the CWLA, child welfare agencies should provide timely and relevant information to various stakeholders regarding the child’s status. As stated in the Introduction (see page 2), Department policies require caseworkers to notify various stakeholders that a child is missing from care within 24 hours of receiving this information, including law enforcement, the child’s out-of-home caregiver, parent(s), guardian ad litem and/or attorney, the courts, and NCMEC, a private nonprofit organization that can create and disseminate missing child posters to help generate leads and raise public awareness about missing children. Laws 2021, Ch. 364, §1, requires law enforcement to notify NCMEC effective September 29, 2021.
- **Obtains photo identification or has access to photos of children in its care that can assist in locating children missing from care**—According to the CWLA, child welfare agencies should maintain photos of children in their care because they can help to locate and properly identify a child missing from care. The Department contractually requires group homes to take photographs of children in their care, store the photographs in the children’s case files, and help obtain State identification cards for children as appropriate to their age. According to the Department, children are more likely to run away from group homes than other placements, and the photographs would be available to caseworkers if needed to provide to law enforcement or NCMEC. In addition, the Department reported that foster and kinship placements often have photographs of children that could be available to caseworkers if needed. Further, the Department reported that it began a collaboration with the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) in fall 2018 to help specific youth in its care ages 14 to 17 obtain State identification cards (which contain a photo). As part of this process, the Department has paid ADOT for the cost of obtaining the State identification. The Department reported that as of July 31, 2021, it had paid for 852 youth to obtain State identification cards.¹⁷
- **Requires timely documentation of efforts to locate children missing from care**—According to the CWLA, maintaining accurate and up-to-date case information helps ensure that the child welfare agency is aware of a child’s location, history, and current status. Department policies require caseworkers to document their efforts to locate children missing from care as case notes in the Department’s case management system within 10 days of the efforts occurring.

Caseworkers did not always comply with Department documentation requirements in cases we reviewed

Our review of 20 cases involving children missing from care in calendar year 2020 found that caseworkers did not always comply with the Department’s documentation requirements, which include documenting notifications and efforts to locate children (within 10 days of the efforts) in case notes.¹⁸ For example:

¹⁶ A.R.S. §13-1310.

¹⁷ Laws 2021, Ch. 329, §2, which is effective September 29, 2021, waives the fee for obtaining a nonoperating identification license for children in Department custody.

¹⁸ We reviewed the case files for a stratified random sample of 20 cases involving children missing from care in calendar year 2020, including 10 cases involving runaway children and 10 cases involving missing/abducted children.

- In all 20 cases we reviewed, caseworkers did not document in case notes that every required stakeholder notification was made, which does not provide assurance that the notifications occurred. For example, in at least 10 cases we reviewed, the caseworker did not document notifying NCMEC.¹⁹ In some of these cases, Department staff reported that NCMEC was notified, or we found the missing child posters on NCMEC's website.²⁰ However, for 1 case where the caseworker did not document notifying NCMEC, we did not find the missing child poster for the child.

In several cases we reviewed, the Department reported it was not necessary for a caseworker to notify some stakeholders for whom there was not a documented notification because they were already aware of the child's status. For example, Department policies require caseworkers to notify the child's out-of-home caregiver, but in most cases involving runaway children we reviewed, the caregiver had reported the runaway child to the Department. In some other cases where we did not see a notification to the child's parent, Department staff reported the parent had absconded with the child. Additionally, some required notifications were accomplished in other ways. For example, the Department's policies require caseworkers to notify the child's guardian ad litem and/or attorney. In 12 of 13 cases we reviewed where the child had an appointed guardian ad litem and/or attorney, the notification was made by an assistant attorney general through the process of filing a motion for pick up.²¹

The Department's policies do not address when specific stakeholder notifications and documentation of those notifications by caseworkers are not applicable, such as when a stakeholder is already aware of a child's status or the notification is accomplished another way.

- In 12 cases, caseworkers documented efforts to locate children in a case note more than 10 days after the efforts occurred. Specifically, these late case notes were entered between 11 and 111 days after the efforts occurred, although most of the late case notes were entered within 30 days after the efforts occurred. Not entering case notes promptly increases the potential that the case note will not be entered or that specific details of the efforts to locate children will not be included, such as in instances of staff turnover or fading recollection.
- In 2 cases, caseworkers did not document the correct classification status in the Department's case management system. Specifically, in 1 case, a runaway child was incorrectly classified as missing, and in the other case, a missing child was classified for an entire year as both missing and runaway.²² In both cases, caseworkers reported being aware of the correct classification, and the issues were user/data entry errors. Incorrectly entering the child's classification in the case management system can potentially impact the Department's reporting of the number of runaway and missing children.
- In 1 case, we identified information about efforts to locate a child that were not documented in case notes. Specifically, 6 distinct efforts to locate a child over an 8-month period were identified in a progress report to the court but not included in the case notes as required by the Department's policies.

¹⁹ As stated in the Introduction (see page 2), Laws 2021, Ch. 364, §1, requires law enforcement to notify NCMEC effective September 29, 2021.

²⁰ We reviewed NCMEC's website to determine whether children from our case review who were still missing from care in February 2021 had missing child posters.

²¹ A motion for pick up is a written motion filed in juvenile court requesting an order to law enforcement officers or other authorized officials to take a minor child from a person who has physical possession of the child and deliver the child to the Department's physical custody.

²² The incorrect classification of a child as both "missing" and "runaway" was from May 2018 to May 2019.

Department has 2 processes for reviewing cases of children missing from care

The Department has 2 processes for reviewing cases of children missing from care at least monthly that can help ensure notifications and efforts to locate the children are made. Specifically:

- **Supervisory review process**—The Department has a monthly supervisory review requirement where caseworkers meet with their supervisors to discuss their cases, including cases involving children missing from care. In this review, supervisors complete a checklist that includes reviewing if the caseworker documented efforts to locate children missing from care in the case management system. Supervisors should also discuss with caseworkers whether the caseworkers have followed Department policy for locating children on runaway status. The Department tracks whether these monthly supervisory meetings occur and reported that this supervisory review constitutes on-the-job caseworker training.
- **Biweekly review of children missing from care**—In calendar year 2020, the Department implemented a biweekly review process to help ensure that information about children missing from care is accurate and up to date in its case management system. Based on the Department’s guidance and template tool for this review, specialized field staff validate that the child’s missing-from-care status is correct, including that the child is still missing from care and that the accurate classification was entered, which should identify misclassifications. In addition, staff review that required notifications to law enforcement and other stakeholders were made and that efforts to locate children were documented. All 3 specialized field staff we interviewed reported that they also provide training to caseworkers as needed when noncompliance with the policies is identified during their review. The Department reported it suspended the biweekly reviews from February through July 2021 while it developed the new reporting needed to perform the reviews after transitioning to its new case management system, Guardian. The Department resumed this review in August 2021.

The Department reported it does not provide formal training on its policies for locating children missing from care because these children comprise a small percentage of the overall population of children in its care. Additionally, the Department reported that caseworkers can review the policies for locating runaway and missing/abducted children and consult with their supervisors as needed, and caseworkers we interviewed generally reported being aware of the policies’ requirements and seeking guidance from their supervisors as needed.

Recommendations

The Department should:

1. Revise its policies to provide guidance on when specific stakeholder notifications and documentation of those notifications by caseworkers are not applicable, such as when a stakeholder is already aware of a child’s status or the notification is accomplished another way.
2. To help ensure timely documentation, expand its biweekly review process to include determining whether efforts to locate children missing from care are occurring and documented in case notes.

Department response: As outlined in its [response](#), the Department agrees with the finding and will implement the recommendations.



Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care

LEGISLATIVE REQUEST: Compare the Department's practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children with best practices.

CONCLUSION: Although the Department's practices are generally consistent with many CWLA-recommended practices we reviewed as described in Finding 1 (see pages 4 through 7), we identified 2 areas where the Department could take additional action. Specifically, although a recommended practice, the Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from care. In addition, the Department's policies lack some detailed guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care.

Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from care

The CWLA's practice guidelines indicate that law enforcement agencies should take the lead on any missing person investigation, which includes runaway and missing children, and that child welfare agencies should collaborate with and assist law enforcement agencies in these efforts. Additionally, Laws 2021, Ch. 364, §1, includes various requirements, effective September 29, 2021, for law enforcement agencies that receive reports of missing, kidnapped, or runaway children. For example, the law requires these law enforcement agencies to institute or assist with appropriate search and investigative procedures; notify NCMEC for missing, kidnapped, or runaway children who are in the foster care system; and maintain a close liaison with State and local child welfare systems (including the Department) and NCMEC for the exchange of information and technical assistance in missing child cases. However, this law does not specify how these requirements are to be implemented.

The Department reported that it works with law enforcement on a case-by-case basis to locate children missing from care and indicated that jurisdictions vary in their willingness and capacity to collaborate with the Department. However, to facilitate collaboration between law enforcement agencies and child welfare agencies, both the CWLA's practice guidelines and companion guidance for law enforcement published by NCMEC recommend developing and implementing formal agreements or mutually agreed-upon protocols that address various elements of coordination, such as each agency's roles and responsibilities and information sharing.²³ Although not specific to locating children missing from care, the Department and law enforcement agencies do have

²³ Child Welfare League of America. (2005). *CWLA best practice guidelines: Children missing from care*. Washington, DC; Smith, T.B., Buniak, K., Condon, L., & Reed, L. (2005). *Children missing from care: The law-enforcement response*. Alexandria, VA: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Retrieved 7/6/21 from <https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/publications/nc162.pdf>.

joint investigative procedures, developed by the county attorneys as required by A.R.S. §8-817, that guide investigations of alleged criminal conduct against a child.

The Department reported that although formalizing expectations with law enforcement regarding their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from care would be of value, establishing a formal agreement with each law enforcement agency in Arizona would be impractical as there are approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in the State.²⁴ However, the Department could work with law enforcement to explore options for formalizing expectations, including working with State policymakers to address potential barriers as needed. For example, the Department could pilot establishing a formal agreement or mutually agreed-upon protocols with a law enforcement agency, such as an agency where improved coordination would be beneficial. The Department could then assess whether the pilot was helpful for improving coordination and, if so, work with State policymakers to determine a practical approach to formalizing expectations between the Department and law enforcement agencies State-wide.

Department policies lack some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care

According to CWLA staff, child welfare agencies should develop and implement policies for locating children that provide guidance on agencies' expectations for locating children missing from care. Although the Department's policies for locating runaway and missing/abducted children outline the general procedures that caseworkers should follow when children go missing from care, they lack some detailed guidance regarding Department expectations and requirements for ongoing efforts to locate children. Department leadership reported that its policies for locating children missing from care are intentionally high-level because it is not possible for the policies to address all potential situations involving these children. However, based on interviews with Department staff and our review of 20 cases, additional guidance would help ensure caseworkers understand and meet Department expectations regarding the types and frequency of ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care. Specifically, the Department's policies can better address:

- **Expected types of ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care**—The Department's policy for locating runaway children requires caseworkers to contact placements, previous schools, and persons who may have information about a child and states that caseworkers may, with supervisor approval, refer a child's case to OCWI staff for assistance when certain circumstances exist, such as the child is pregnant or suicidal. The policy for locating missing/abducted children requires caseworkers to contact persons who may have information about a child and to provide any information gathered to law enforcement.

However, the policies do not address other types of ongoing efforts caseworkers reported using or we identified in our case review that could assist in locating missing children, such as visiting possible locations where a child may be, requesting that law enforcement conduct welfare checks at a child's possible location, searching social media, and requesting assistance from specialized field staff who have access to various databases that can help in the search for information leads.

- **Expected frequency of ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care**—Although the Department's policy for locating runaway children includes a requirement to recontact individuals after 90 days, the policy is not clear if this is the only ongoing effort that is required and if these contacts are to occur every 90 days or only once after 90 days. Additionally, Department leadership reported it is their expectation that caseworkers make continuous efforts to locate missing/abducted children; however, the policy for

²⁴ As discussed on page 10, we also reviewed 8 other jurisdictions' policies and guidance documents for locating children missing from care and identified 1 jurisdiction that had established a formal agreement with law enforcement related to children missing from care. Specifically, in Florida, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) exists between the Florida Department of Children and Families, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE), and NCMEC that addresses responsibilities for notifying and keeping NCMEC informed of children missing from care. FLDE serves as a liaison among citizens, private organizations, and law enforcement officials regarding missing children information in Florida and reported that it does not oversee local law enforcement agencies. Although, effective September 29, 2021, Arizona law enforcement agencies are required to notify NCMEC of children in the foster care system who are missing from care, this MOU serves as an illustration of formalized collaboration between another jurisdiction and law enforcement.

locating missing/abducted children does not address making continuous efforts or how frequently efforts should occur.

Although we noted ongoing efforts to locate children in many cases we reviewed—such as continued contact with family, significant persons, and law enforcement—we also noted instances when efforts to locate missing children were not documented in case notes for a period of several months. Specifically, in 5 cases, no ongoing efforts to locate the children were documented in case notes for periods of approximately 2 to 7 months. Further, caseworkers we interviewed reported varying practices regarding the frequency of their ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care. For example, some caseworkers reported conducting ongoing efforts weekly, biweekly, or monthly; however, 1 caseworker reported conducting efforts as time permitted. Caseworkers similarly reported varying practices regarding how frequently they communicated with law enforcement. For example, 2 caseworkers reported conducting a monthly check-in with law enforcement, while 1 caseworker reported having no interaction with law enforcement.

We reviewed policies and guidance documents for locating children missing from care for 8 jurisdictions and noted that, although the level of detail varied, these jurisdictions provided more guidance in at least some areas.²⁵ For example, 5 jurisdictions provide guidance for continued collaboration with law enforcement, all 8 jurisdictions provide guidance on using social media to locate children missing from care, and 7 jurisdictions provide clearer expectations for the frequency of ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care. The textbox provides examples of this guidance for some jurisdictions.

Examples of jurisdictions' guidance for locating children missing from care

Los Angeles County—Los Angeles County requires at least monthly efforts to locate children missing from care. These efforts are required to include, but are not limited to, making inquiries to parties (e.g., law enforcement, parents, friends, schools, and former social workers); physically checking all places where the child is likely to be; searching social media accounts of the child, known acquaintances, friend lists, and comment sections; and searching relevant databases.

Minnesota—Minnesota requires monthly efforts to locate children missing from care. These efforts are required to include checking social media sites and contacting and requesting information from knowledgeable parties (e.g., law enforcement, relatives, friends, and teachers). Caseworkers are required to meet weekly with supervisors regarding efforts to locate children missing from care.

Vermont—Vermont requires weekly efforts to locate children missing from care. These efforts are required to include weekly contact with law enforcement and may include, but are not limited to, contacting the child's friends, family, school, and other knowledgeable individuals, and using social media to determine a possible location based on posted updates. Caseworkers and supervisors are required to review efforts to locate children missing from care within the first week and every 2 weeks thereafter.

Source: Auditor General staff review of other jurisdictions' applicable policies and guidance documents.

Recommendations

The Department should:

3. Work with law enforcement to formalize expectations regarding their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from Department care, and work with State policymakers to address potential barriers as needed. For example, the Department could pilot establishing a formal agreement or mutually agreed-upon protocols with 1 or more of the approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in Arizona, such as an agency where improved coordination would be beneficial; assess whether the pilot was helpful for improving coordination; and if so, work with State policymakers to determine a practical approach

²⁵ The 8 jurisdictions included Connecticut, Florida, Los Angeles County, Minnesota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Washington. We judgmentally selected these jurisdictions based on availability of information or suggestion from a best practice organization.

to formalizing expectations between the Department and law enforcement agencies State-wide. The Department and law enforcement could explore other options for formalizing expectations as well.

4. Update its policies and/or develop supplemental guidance documents to provide additional guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care and their collaboration with law enforcement, and ensure caseworkers who manage cases involving children missing from care are informed of and trained on this additional guidance.

Department response: As outlined in its [response](#), the Department agrees with the finding and will implement or implement in a different manner the recommendations.



SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Auditor General makes 4 recommendations to the Department

The Department should:

1. Revise its policies to provide guidance on when specific stakeholder notifications and documentation of those notifications by caseworkers are not applicable, such as when a stakeholder is already aware of a child's status or the notification is accomplished another way (see Finding 1, pages 4 through 7, for more information).
2. To help ensure timely documentation, expand its biweekly review process to include determining whether efforts to locate children missing from care are occurring and documented in case notes (see Finding 1, pages 4 through 7, for more information).
3. Work with law enforcement to formalize expectations regarding their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from Department care, and work with State policymakers to address potential barriers as needed. For example, the Department could pilot establishing a formal agreement or mutually agreed-upon protocols with 1 or more of the approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in Arizona, such as an agency where improved coordination would be beneficial; assess whether the pilot was helpful for improving coordination; and if so, work with State policymakers to determine a practical approach to formalizing expectations between the Department and law enforcement agencies State-wide. The Department and law enforcement could explore other options for formalizing expectations as well (see Finding 2, pages 8 through 11, for more information).
4. Update its policies and/or develop supplemental guidance documents to provide additional guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care and their collaboration with law enforcement, and ensure caseworkers who manage cases involving children missing from care are informed of and trained on this additional guidance (see Finding 2, pages 8 through 11, for more information).



Scope and methodology

The Arizona Auditor General has issued this special report of the Department's practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children and comparing these practices to best practices pursuant to Laws 2020, Ch. 53, §3.

We used various methods to meet the report's objectives. Specifically, to review the Department's practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children, we:

- Reviewed the Department's policies for locating runaway and missing/abducted children.
- Interviewed Department management and staff, including 9 caseworkers, 4 supervisors, and 6 other specialized staff.
- Reviewed a stratified random sample of 20 cases involving 21 children missing from care in calendar year 2020, including 10 cases involving runaway children and 10 cases involving missing/abducted children.²⁶
- Reviewed NCMEC's website in February 2021 to look for missing child posters for the 10 children from our case review who were still missing from care at that time.

To review best practices and other jurisdictions' practices, we:

- Reviewed practice guidelines concerning children missing from care published by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and compared the Department's practices against the CWLA's recommended practices.^{27,28} We also interviewed a representative from the CWLA. Additionally, we reviewed a companion piece to CWLA's practice guidelines published by NCMEC concerning law enforcement's response to children missing from care.²⁹
- Corresponded with representatives from other best practice organizations, including Chapin Hall, NCMEC, and Casey Family Programs.
- Reviewed Arizona statutes and rules and federal codes.
- Reviewed policies and guidance documents for locating children missing from care for 8 other jurisdictions, including Connecticut, Florida, Los Angeles County, Minnesota, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, and Vermont.

²⁶ We selected 20 cases to review by selecting children who were on missing or runaway status in calendar year 2020. Specifically, we randomly selected 5 of 664 children who were on runaway status and 5 of 120 children who were on missing status during calendar year 2020 but were no longer on runaway or missing status as of January 14, 2021, and 5 of 252 children who were on runaway status and 6 of 31 children who were on missing status during calendar year 2020 and remained on runaway or missing status as of January 14, 2021 (2 of these 6 children were siblings in the same case, so we selected a sixth child in order to review 5 cases).

²⁷ Child Welfare League of America. (2005). *CWLA best practice guidelines: Children missing from care*. Washington, DC.

²⁸ We selected the CWLA guidelines for comparison to Department practices based on suggestions from 2 best practice organizations: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and NCMEC.

²⁹ Smith, T.B., Buniak, K., Condon, L., & Reed, L. (2005). *Children missing from care: The law-enforcement response*. Alexandria, VA: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. Retrieved 7/6/21 from <https://www.missingkids.org/content/dam/missingkids/pdfs/publications/nc162.pdf>.

We judgmentally selected these jurisdictions based on availability of information or suggestion from a best practice organization.

We selected our audit samples to provide sufficient evidence to support our findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Unless otherwise noted, the results of our testing using these samples were not intended to be projected to the entire population.

We express our appreciation to the Department's Director and staff for their cooperation and assistance throughout the review.

DEPARTMENT RESPONSE

September 22, 2021

Ms. Lindsey Perry
Auditor General
Arizona Office of the Auditor General
2910 North 44th Street, Suite 410
Phoenix, Arizona 85018

Re: Auditor General Report – *Comparing Department Practices for Classifying and Locating Runaway or Missing Children from Care to Best Practices*

Dear Ms. Perry:

The Arizona Department of Child Safety (Department) appreciates the opportunity to provide this response to the Arizona Office of the Auditor General's (OAG) findings and recommendations in the report of the Department's practices for classifying and locating runaway or missing children. The Department acknowledges the importance of aligning practices with the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and values the importance of collaborating with law enforcement with children missing from care.

The report has been reviewed and the Department's response to each recommendation is enclosed. The Department appreciates the collaborative effort throughout this process.

Sincerely,

Mike Faust
Director

Enclosure: DCS Recommendation Response

Finding 1: Department practices for classifying and locating children missing from care are generally consistent with CWLA-recommended practices, but caseworkers did not always comply with documentation requirements

Recommendation 1: The Department should revise its policies to provide guidance on when specific stakeholder notification and documentation of those notifications by caseworkers are not applicable, such as when a stakeholder is already aware of a child's status or the notification is accomplished another way.

Department response: The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the audit recommendation will be implemented.

Response explanation: The Department acknowledges the policies for missing and runaway children would benefit from clarification. The Department agrees to revise its policies to provide more guidance on the specific applicable documentation requirements when a stakeholder notification is accomplished in an alternate way; most notably when a required stakeholder to be notified is in fact the individual notifying the Department.

Recommendation 2: To help ensure timely documentation, the Department should expand its biweekly review process to include determining whether efforts to locate children missing from care are occurring and documented in case notes.

Department response: The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the audit recommendation will be implemented.

Response explanation: Although documentation is secondary to action, the Department understands the importance of documenting efforts to locate children. In addition to the supervisory responsibility to ensure timely documentation, the Department will expand its biweekly process to include the review of documented efforts to locate children missing from care.

Finding 2: Department and law enforcement have not formalized expectations for collaboration, and Department lacks some detailed guidance for caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care

Recommendation 3: The Department should work with law enforcement to formalize expectations regarding their respective roles and responsibilities for locating children missing from Department care, and work with State policymakers to address potential barriers as needed. For example, the Department could pilot establishing a formal agreement or mutually agreed-upon protocols with 1 or more of the approximately 150 law enforcement agencies in Arizona, such as an agency where improved coordination would be beneficial; assess whether the pilot was helpful for improving coordination; and, if so, work with State policymakers to determine a practical approach to formalizing expectations between the Department and law enforcement agencies State-wide. The Department and law enforcement could explore other options for formalizing expectations as well.

Department response: The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and a different method of dealing with the finding will be implemented.

Response explanation: The Department values the collaboration with law enforcement agencies, currently has joint investigation protocols agreements in place and acknowledges the benefit of further partnership in locating children missing from care. The Department works diligently with

law enforcement agencies on a regular basis to ensure coordination. The Department may explore options, including working with State policymakers as required, to formalize expectations, and may explore coordination with the Arizona Department of Public Safety regarding the functions or role they have with missing children.

Recommendation 4: The Department should update its policies and/or develop supplemental guidance documents to provide additional guidance on its expectations for the types and frequency of caseworkers' ongoing efforts to locate children missing from care and their collaboration with law enforcement, and ensure caseworkers who manage cases involving children missing from care are informed of and trained on this additional guidance.

Department response: The finding of the Auditor General is agreed to and the audit recommendation will be implemented.

Response explanation: The types and frequency of efforts to locate children missing from care and collaboration with law enforcement are essential components. The Department will update its policies to provide additional guidance on the expectations to locate missing children.

